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Choose Healing  
Martin Grove United Church  
February 12, 2017  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Sirach 15:15-20 and Matthew 5:21-37

Well - today's texts are certainly a challenge. I have often been told that the sermon on the mount was supposed to be comforting - but I don't feel very comforted right now. What do you think about, "if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire". Not very comforting. And it is disturbing to imagine that thinking evil thoughts is just as bad as committed evil actions. How can that be? Besides, if it was that simple we'd all be living at the Toronto South Detention Centre. And Jesus's blanket prohibition on divorce is not something we agree with here in the United Church. I found it hard to even read those words out loud a moment ago.

Beyond that, the "cure" Jesus suggests is worse than the disease. Cut off my hand? Remove my eye? And for what? What would be the point of cutting off my hand - for example - if thinking bad thoughts condemns me anyway? If I cut off my hand to prevent me from killing someone, but I think about killing them - it is as if I have committed the murder anyway. Cutting off my hand would not fix the problem. The only way to avoid sin would be to cut out my brain! And even on my bad days, I find my brain something of an asset.

The gospel text reads more like a Monty Python script than a piece of holy scripture. What is Jesus getting at here? Well - ranting aside - I believe that Jesus is actually getting at something that is in fact very real indeed. Something that we all experience. Something very common. I admit that the macabre images leave me unmoved, but there is something very basic and important in Jesus's message.

How often have you been driving along when - through no fault of your own of course - you became angry at another driver? Has that ever happened to you? But I'll bet you've also had the experience where you became angry at a complete stranger very quickly - but through some strange series of events you actually got into conversation with the stranger. And when you got into conversation with them you came to realize

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that both of you were actually human - and your anger disappeared.

A friend of mine shared a story with me recently. Years ago she found herself in a situation where she had to get her father to a hospital quickly. For reasons I can no longer remember, she drove him herself. Down the Don Valley Parkway. Mid week. During rush hour. She wasn't crazy. She knew traffic would be terrible. But her plan was to drive down the shoulder. OK - perhaps she was crazy. In any case, she figured that other drivers would not object to her using the shoulder to allow her to bring her father to the hospital as quickly as possible. Well, she was both right and wrong on that point. Because my friend had the privilege of meeting quite a few people that day. On her drive, something like 8 people pulled in front of her to cut her off at different times. To bring her down to the speed of everyone else who was crawling down the parkway. And in all 8 cases, my friend got out of her car and went forward - that's how slow the traffic was - to explain her situation to the other drivers. And in all 8 cases, she was faced with a lot of anger and hostility. And in all 8 cases she patiently explained why she needed to get her father to the hospital. And in all 8 cases, the anger and hostility that she faced completely disappeared. And in all 8 cases she was allowed to proceed down the shoulder - at least until the next person further ahead decided to stop her and she repeated the whole process.

Not only did my friend - eventually - get to a hospital, but she connected with 8 people on the way. Because of the urgency to move on, I won't claim that any lasting friendships were built, but with all 8 people their anger was actually transformed into understanding, connection, and caring. Anger had been turned into relationship at some level.

Stories like that make lead me to realizing that Jesus does have a point. Perhaps Jesus is overstating his case - but he does have a case. Obviously hating a person is not the same as killing them, because anger may dissipate, but murder is permanent. However, if you are consistently angry with a person, you are killing the relationship you could have with them. And that's true even if the other person has no idea that you are angry with them. Anger kills relationships, and the potential for building relationships. Anger kills love. Anger kills excitement. See - Jesus was right - anger does kill!

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Which is probably why Jesus spoke against anger. Sure, Jesus was angry himself sometimes. And anger - as an emotion - is something that we need to experience, name, and process when it enters our lives. But chronic anger destroys relationships, and the kingdom of God is all about relationships: renewed relationships, new relationships, healed relationships.

I think the English language doesn't always help us. We talk about "being angry", but there are two separate phases to that. In phase 1, we "get angry". In phase 2, we "remain angry", or to use the modern phrase, we "hold anger".

The first phase - getting angry - is something we generally cannot control. Anger rises up automatically within us when certain external events happen. That's how emotions work. That's the gift of being human. The next time someone cuts you off in traffic and you instantly become angry, consider your anger a "celebration of your own humanity."

But the second phase - holding anger - is something we control. Scientists have determined that the first phase - the uncontrollable "getting angry phase" - is short-lived, usually lasting less than 10 seconds and never lasting more than 90 seconds. According to Alex Myles, "All [stimulated] emotions last for less than 90 seconds ... If anything continues after that it is because we have added our own story and chosen to hold on to the emotion. Therefore, we are causing our emotions to escalate further and we are also ensuring they last longer. The more often we replay the memory, that is attached to a thought, or repeat one of our old painful stories, we remain caught in the cycle and it will get more and more difficult to disconnect."<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha had two interesting quotes about holding on to anger. One is, "Holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die" And, "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned."

And yet, I know that many people are offended by the idea that anger has to be let go of. What about anger that is being held for "good reasons". Surely it's my duty to hold anger if other people do inappropriate things or things that are truly evil. Right?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2015/10/the-life-changing-90-second-secret/>

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Well, I know it feels like that makes sense. However, it doesn't seem to work that way. What do you think Nelson Mandela said after being released from prison after 27 year. Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years for very unjust reasons. When he was released, Mandela had any number of good reasons to feel anger or hatred against the people who put him in prison and against those who kept him in prison. On his release, he had this to say, "Yes, I was angry. And I was a little afraid. After all I've not been free in so long. But, when I felt that anger well up inside of me, I realized that if I hated them after I got outside that [prison] gate, then they would still have me. I wanted to be free so I let it go".

Becoming angry is never our own choice. But holding anger is always our own choice.

In our reading from Sirach, God gives us fire and water - life and death - and we are invited to choose. And Sirach's words are that whichever option we choose is what God will provide. Imagine that. In other words, we should be careful what we ask for, because we just might get it!

What will we choose? Fire or water? Death or life? Holding anger, or letting go of it? I invite you to consider the image on the bulletin cover. The image shows bright blue sky, but there is a barrier between us and that sky. However, there is a break in the barrier. In the image, the break is in the shape of a heart, because that break was created by love.

I invite you to take the bulletin home with you and spend some time with it. Reflect on any barriers to your own freedom that you have built up over your life. Imagine a hole in your barrier. Imagine what shape that hole should be. And then, break your own barrier and find new life. Find hope. Find healing.

Choose to let go of whatever is holding you back. Choose healing.

*Amen.*